Audience Perception of Social Media Influencers and Their Influence on Consumer Purchase Intention in Abuja

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Abstract
This study examined audience perception of social media influencers and their influence on consumer purchase intention in Abuja, Nigeria. The survey research method was adopted, using a self-administered questionnaire to gather data. A total of 380 respondents participated in the study determined through multistage sampling. The data gathered was descriptively analysed using table frequencies and percentages. Findings revealed that there is a high exposure to social media influencers among residents in Abuja, especially among the young and educated demographics. Most respondents perceived influencers as being credible, trustworthy and knowledgeable, consistent with the Source Credibility Theory. The results further showed that positive perception of influencer credibility strongly influenced consumer purchase intentions, with 72.1% of respondents considering products recommended by influencers and 64.7% confirming actual purchases. The study concludes that social media influencers significantly shape consumer behaviour in Abuja and recommends that brands, influencers and communication practitioners prioritise authenticity, transparency and credibility in digital campaigns.

Keywords: Audience Perception, Social Media Influencers, Influence, Consumer Purchase Intention.

Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X and Facebook has transformed communication and marketing globally. These platforms have shifted the dynamics of interpersonal communication, creating interactive environments where users are not only consumers of content but also active participants in its production and distribution. This participatory culture has enabled brands to move beyond traditional advertising models towards more personalised and interactive strategies. Social media has therefore emerged as a powerful tool for shaping consumer awareness, preferences, and purchasing decisions on a global scale.

Within this changing digital ecosystem, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as prominent figures shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. Unlike traditional celebrities who attract attention through performances, influencers build communities by sharing lifestyle content, personal narratives, and product endorsements, which are often perceived as authentic and relatable (Abidin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020). The effectiveness of influencer marketing

is frequently explained through source credibility theory, which posits that persuasiveness depends on the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Empirical studies confirm that these traits strongly predict consumer acceptance of influencer endorsements (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In Nigeria, where social media has become intertwined with lifestyle aspirations, influencer marketing is increasingly evident in sectors such as fashion, beauty, technology, and entertainment (Okorie et al., 2022). Yet, cultural nuances, including skepticism towards paid endorsements, complicate the ways audiences interpret influencer credibility. The country has experienced exponential growth in social media usage, with over 31 million active users as of 2024, dominated by youth and urban professionals (DataReportal, 2024). Abuja, in particular, is a cosmopolitan hub with a youthful, tech-savvy, and consumer-driven population, making it a critical site for examining digital marketing trends (NBS, 2023).

Despite anecdotal evidence of influencer power, empirical studies remain limited on how Abuja residents perceive influencers and the extent to which these perceptions shape their consumer purchasing intention. Given that global findings may not fully translate to African contexts, there is a pressing need for localised research that addresses cultural and demographic specificities. This study therefore, seeks to investigate audience perception of social media influencers in Abuja and their influence on consumer purchase intention. The study will contribute to both scholarly understanding and practical strategies for marketers, while filling a significant gap in Nigeria's empirical literature on the influence of influencer marketing.

Statement of the Problem

Social media influencers have become key actors in influencing the purchasing behaviour of consumers worldwide (Olanrewaju & Suleiman, 2021). In Abuja, Nigeria, brand owners are increasingly using these influencers to communicate products and services. Nevertheless, whereas the application of influencer marketing continues to rise, little empirical research exists documenting how Abuja residents perceive the influencer and if such perceptions meaningfully shape the behaviour of consumers. Whereas some consumers perceive the influencer as credible and trustworthy while endorsing products and services, other consumers are doubtful and think that such endorsement offers the influencer pecuniary returns. The absence of such context-specific studies leaves businesses and practitioners of communication guessing the real influence the influencer exerts on consumers' choice in Abuja.

Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:
1. To assess respondents' level of awareness and exposure to social media influencers.
2. To examine respondents' perception of influencers' credibility, trustworthiness and expertise.
3. To determine the influence of social media influencers on respondents' purchase intention.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of respondents' awareness of social media influencers?
2. How do respondents perceive the credibility, trustworthiness and expertise of influencers?
3. What is the influence of social media influencers on respondents' purchase intention?

Literature Review
Social Media Brand Influencers

The development of digital platforms has ushered in a new form of opinion leaders who are better known as social media brand influencers (SMBIs). Social media brand influencers are individuals who by the regular production and sharing of content establish a sizable following online and by using such influence direct the attitudes and behaviours of the audience towards specific brands, products, or services (Abidin, 2016). Unlike mainstream-recognised celebrities who become famous through mainstream media channels, SMBIs sometimes establish credibility and trust through perceived genuine behaviour and relatability by portraying themselves as "normal people" who audiences may associate and empathise with (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Influencers are generally understood to be "those who hold the power to influence the purchasing decisions of other individuals through their authority, knowledge, position, or relevance to the audience" (Freberg et al., 2011:90). They operate on social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube and Facebook, and produce content ranging from the endorsement of products to the endorsement of lifestyle (Lou & Yuan, 2019). By incorporating personal experience and promotion messages, SMBIs typically blur the advertising-entertainment binary which amplifies the persuasive effectiveness (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). A distinctive feature of SMBIs is the perceived source credibility through expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Empirical research discovers that when influencers are perceived as authentic and competent, recommendations yield positive influences on consumers' trusting and purchasing intent (Jin et al., 2019; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Such explanatory power finds endorsement in the likes of the Source Credibility Model and the Two-Step Flow of Communication, suggesting audiences become more likely to adopt attitudes or behaviour when messages are delivered by opinion leaders who are trusted (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

In Nigeria, social media influencers who are brand endorsers have become central to marketing communication, especially in the fashion, beauty, entertainment and technology industries. Brands engage influencers because they can tap into niches and gather engagement that mainstream media sometimes cannot (Okorie et al., 2022). Yet, while influencers are basked in glory for influencing consumers' preferences, questions have arisen regarding the validity of endorsements, particularly when influencers endorse solely for pecuniary reasons (Okorie & Oyesomi, 2018). This dilemma highlights the necessity to research how audiences perceive influencers and how such perceptions influence consumers' behaviour in such unique contexts as Abuja.

Influencers and Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is framed by various social and psychological considerations such as attitudes, beliefs, and social influence. It has been confirmed by studies that social media influencers are a major influence on consumers' decision-making process at the awareness, consideration, and purchase decision stages (Lou & Yuan, 2019). For example, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) verified that young UK female consumers had more trust in Instagram influencers than mainstream celebrities when they made buying decisions. Accordingly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) verified influencer credibility and parasocial interaction as major positive predictors of buying intentions on Instagram and YouTube.

In Nigeria, research finds that influencers are seen at the heart of influencing consumption behaviour, particularly among the youth (Okorie et al., 2022). Nevertheless, audience subjectivity continues to exist since some consumers query if influencers actually consume the products that they advertise (Okorie & Oyesomi, 2018). Such subjectivity can dilute the connection between influencer endorsement and real-life behaviour among

consumers, and exploration among a section such as the residents in Abuja becomes imperative.

Role of Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are a key part of influencer marketing, serving as an intermediary for the interaction between brands and consumers (Nabirasool, et al., 2025). Their function is more than that of advertising products or services; they serve as relatable and trusted figures who can influence consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. Below are the key features of their work, as outlined by Nabirasool, et al. (2025):

1. Trust and Credibility: Social media influencers build credibility and trust with their followers through genuine, honest and transparent communications. Their followers regard them as authentic sources of information and advice because of their knowledge, sincere interest, and regular content.

2. Audience Reach and Engagement: Influencers possess direct and significant reach in their niche or target audience. Their potential to engage their audience through interesting content, narratives, and interactions maximizes their influence. This interaction is important in propelling brand consideration, awareness and conversion.

3. Content Creation and Storytelling: Influencers are adept content creators who customise their messaging to connect with their audience. They possess the skill to develop interesting stories consistent with a brand's purpose and values, conveying the brand message in an engaging as well as genuine way.

4. Market Segmentation and Targeting: As most influencers focus on niche subjects, brands are in a position to connect with a more specific audience. Whatever it is, be it fashion, travel, fitness, or technology, influencers offer an instant platform to reach a niche audience, increasing campaign effectiveness.

5. Consumer Direction and Recommendations: Influencers direct their fans by recommending products or services, reviewing them, and sharing insights. Customers tend to seek the opinion and approval of influencers prior to purchasing decisions, giving a lot of importance to their recommendations.

6. Authenticity and Relatability: Influencers are people that can be related to who express their genuine experiences, views and choices. This authenticity constructs a feeling of familiarity with their audience and thus their endorsements become more authentic and trustworthy.

7. Two-Way Communication: The influencers create a sense of belongingness by creating space for two-way communication with their audience. They hear their followers attentively, respond to their queries, and incorporate their feedback into their strategy, thus cementing the relationship and credibility further.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Source Credibility Theory.

The Source Credibility Theory came up through the works by Hovland and Weiss (1951) in the most celebrated research on the effectiveness of communication. The theory asserts that the persuasiveness of the message in communication mostly rests on the perceived credibility by the communicator delivering the message. Most cases measure credibility in three dimensions including trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

Trustworthiness can be defined as the extent to which the source comes across as truthful, credible and fair (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). For social media influencer promotion, the actors who seem authentic and open in the promotion they portray are most likely to be trusted by the audience.

Expertise refers to knowledge or experience the communicator possesses that the audience assumes (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). For instance, a beauty YouTuber who is experienced as a professional in doing skincare will generally be considered more influential than one who isn't.

Attractiveness pertains to the communicator's likability, charisma, or physical attractiveness and can increase message acceptance (Ohanian, 1990). Attractiveness on social media also includes influencers' online personalities and relatability that usually lead to audience engagement.

Several studies confirmed the applicability of the theory in online communication. Lou and Yuan (2019) confirmed that the influencer's credibility strongly predicts the social media branded content trust of the consumer. Likewise, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) confirmed that the influencer's expertise and trustworthiness strongly influence the purchasing intentions among YouTube and Instagram users. Such research findings confirm the applicability of Source Credibility Theory in the understanding of how audiences respond to influencer endorsements. In the Nigerian case, the theory is most applicable since consumers are usually doubtful about the genuineness of influencer promotional messages. It has been established through research that Nigerian audiences watch influencer content despite the fact that doubt is created when influencers are seen running promotions merely for profit motives (Okorie & Oyesomi, 2018). Such audience perception regarding credibility then forms the basis for influencer marketing influencing consumer behaviour in Abuja.

By using the theory of Source Credibility, this research examines how consumers in Abuja rate influencers on the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness and what such ratings do to their purchasing decision.

Method of Study

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine audience perception of social media influencers and their influence on consumer purchase intention. Using Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 400 was determined from a population of 4.21 million (according to Macrotrends, 2025); however, 380 questionnaires were retrieved. Respondents were selected through multistage sampling. A structured, self-administered questionnaire served as the research instrument, consisting of sections on socio-demographics, exposure to influencers, perceptions of credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness), and purchase intention (measured using a 5-point Likert scale). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages described demographic characteristics. Results were presented in tables for clarity.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Table 1: Gender

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Male	170	44.7%
Female	210	55.3%
Total	380	100%

The results show that a majority of respondents were female 210 (55.3%).

Table 2: Age

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
18–25 years	160	42.1%
26–35 years	145	38.2%
36 years & above	75	19.7%
Total	380	100%

The results show that a majority of respondents were between 18–35 years (80.3%), reflecting the youthful population that actively engages with social media.

Table 3: Educational Level

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	-	-
Secondary	45	11.8%
Tertiary	280	73.7%
Postgraduate	55	14.5%
Total	380	100%

The results show that tertiary education holders dominated the sample (73.7%), indicating a relatively educated audience.

Table 4. Exposure to Social Media Influencers

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	190	50.0%
Often	120	31.6%
Occasionally	50	13.2%
Rarely	20	5.2%
Total	380	100%

The majority of respondents (81.6%) reported that they often or very often follow social media influencers, suggesting high exposure levels among Abuja residents.

Table 5. Audience Perception of Influencer Credibility

Responses	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Total
Influencers are trustworthy	239 (60.5%)	94 (24.7%)	56 (14.8%)	380 (100%)
Influencers are knowledgeable about products	250 (65.8%)	76 (20.0%)	54 (14.2%)	380 (100%)
Influencers' attractiveness makes them likable	266 (70.0%)	58 (15.3%)	56 (14.7%)	380 (100%)

Most respondents perceived influencers as trustworthy (60.5%), knowledgeable (65.8%), and attractive (70.0%). This indicates that Abuja audiences generally hold positive perceptions of influencers' credibility.

Table 6. Influence on Consumer Behaviour

Responses	Yes	No	Not Sure	Total
I have considered buying a product recommended by an influencer	274 (72.1%)	72 (18.9%(	34 (9.0)	380 (100%)
I have purchased a product promoted by an influencer	246 (64.7%)	96 (25.3%)	38 (10.0%)	380 (100%)
I trust influencer recommendations more than adverts	209 (55.0%)	114 (30.0%)	57 (15.0%)	380 (100%)

Findings reveal that 72.1% of respondents considered buying a product recommended by influencers, while 64.7% reported making actual purchases based on such recommendations. This suggests that influencer marketing plays a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour in Abuja.

Discussion of Findings
Research Question 1: What is the level of respondents' awareness of social media influencers?
The survey findings in Table 4 indicate that exposure to social media influencers is fairly widespread among Abuja residents. Out of the 380 respondents who participated in the survey, 190 (50.0%) indicated that they "very often" follow influencers and 120 (31.6%) said they do so "often." Just 20 respondents (5.2%) said they experience rare exposure. This translates to 310 respondents (81.6%) who constantly internetwork with influencers online.

This high degree of exposure may be traced to the mass proliferation of digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and X that have become the hub of the consumption of information and entertainment in Nigeria (Okorie & Salawu, 2016). The fact that the respondents' population had a youthful skew such that 80.3% of them were aged 18–35 years also accounts for this pattern as the youth are more active social media users (Pew

Research Center, 2021). The corollary is that social media influencers stand in a strategic position to influence consumption patterns in Abuja since the audience regularly consumes what they produce.

Research Question 2: How do respondents perceive the credibility, trustworthiness and expertise of influencers?

Findings in Table 5 reveal that the respondents generally regard the influencers as credible. As indicated, 230 (60.5%) agreed that the influencers are reliable, 250 (65.8%) agreed that the influencers are knowledgeable about the product, and 266 (70.0%) agreed that the attractiveness of the influencer makes them endearing. This implies that Abuja audiences perceive the influencers as fairly credible individuals who can be trusted when presented with product or brand information.

These results confirm the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) that message persuasiveness depends on the communicator's trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. From the research, the respondents highly rated the influencers in each of the three dimensions, affirming the position that influencer marketing effectiveness may be improved through the enhancement of the marketer's or influencer's credibility. It must be said that while a sizeable percent (24.7% on trustworthiness and 20.0% on expertise) disagreed, indicating that not all audiences accept influencer messages at face value, the fact that a sizeable percent disagreed may be a reflection (from the respondents) that endorsements may be seen by them as commercially driven and not genuine (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020).

Research Question 3: What is the influence of social media influencers on respondents' purchase intention?

Results shown in Table 6 indicate a significant relationship exists between the perceptions of influencers among audiences and intentions to purchase among consumers. A notable majority among the respondents, 274 (72.1%), said they had contemplated purchasing a product endorsed by an influencer, and 246 (64.7%) actually verified purchasing influencer-endorsed products. Further still, 209 (55.0%) said they trusted influencer endorsement even more than they did advertising.

The findings indicate that influencer credibility perceptions yield real-consumer behaviour. When audiences encounter influencers whose knowledge and trustworthiness they believe in, they are likely to be convinced to attempt endorsed products. This corroborates previous studies demonstrating that purchase intention in online contexts has strong associations with the credibility of the message source (Lim et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, Abuja influencers are not merely opinion leaders but also behavioural drivers who fill the gap between the brand message and the decision-making process by the end-consumer.

Conclusion

This study investigated audience perception of social media influencers and their impact on consumer purchase intention among residents of Abuja. The study made some major findings. First, there is high exposure to influencers, especially among young and educated demographics, highlighting the centrality of social media in everyday life. Second, influencers are generally considered as credible, with trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness contributing to their persuasive appeal, in line with the Source Credibility Theory. Third, the positive perceptions of influencers are strongly associated with consumer purchase intentions, with a significant proportion of respondents not only considering but also making purchases based on influencer recommendations.

Overall, the research finds that social media influencers in Abuja are also very important shapers of consumers' purchasing decisions. Although there exists a degree of scepticism among some respondents, the general evidence finds influencer marketing to be a good communication approach by which brands can connect with urban Nigerian consumers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Social media influencers should be used strategically by companies and organisations, focusing on influencers that align with the brand, as audiences are more likely to be convinced to patronise a brand if the influencer shows genuine connection to the brand.

2. Social media influencers should maintain credibility in their dealings with brands, companies and the audiences, as credibility is what drives sales and influences purchasing decisions.

3. There is a need for influencer marketing rules in Nigeria to maintain ethical standards, protect consumers from fraudulent endorsements, and foster trust in online advertising.

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